



# The Prairie Astronomer

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5-82

## Non-Astronomer: 'Turn Off Lights!'

*(Editor's Note: The following is a commentary by Joan Beck of the Chicago Tribune, distributed to several hundred newspapers around the country.)*

Summoned from the frozen infinity beyond the solar system by cosmic forces only dimly understood, Halley's comet is already rushing precipitously toward its once-in-most-lifetimes hairpin turn around the sun in 1986.

But most of us may miss the awesome sight of the great comet that has been linked so closely with human history--because light pollution from our cities now almost obliterates the wonders of the nighttime sky. Along with the generations of people who have filled history books with the fear and awe inspired by the coming of the splendid comet every 76 years since 240 B.C., we may blind ourselves to its sight.

Light pollution now prevents most city dwellers from seeing most of the stars at night. And it will probably keep them from getting even a glimpse of the great comet that many of our parents and grandparents have talked about since its last flyby in 1910.

It doesn't have to be so, argues Fred Schaaf, a columnist for Astronomy magazine. He's proposing that cities and towns begin planning now to dim their artificial lights for a time--perhaps only half an hour an evening--on at least one of the days when the comet sweeps past so we can see the historic phenomenon and the rest of the spectacularly starry sky.

Schaaf is getting support from the Light Pollution Committee of the Astronomical League, an organization of amateur astronomy clubs. And the International Halley Watch, a group coordinating data on the comet's reappearance, says reducing the artificial light on crucial nights would help in collection scientific observations.

It's such a lovely vision: the whole world turning down its lights and looking up to the heavens to share a cosmic wonder--not only with each other but with eons of our ancestors.

But second thoughts are only a millisecond behind: We wouldn't dare turn out the lights. It would be too

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### MAY MEETING

The May meeting of the Prairie Astronomy Club will be held on May 25th at 7:30 pm within the walls of good old Hyde Observatory. This month's program will be an entertaining tape show entitled "The Last Question" written by Isaac Asimov and narrated by Leonard Nimoy.



## A Non-Astronomer Comments On Light Pollution (From Page 1)

dangerous. Remember the pillaging in New York City during the power failure a few years ago? Bad things happen in the dark. We can't look up because we have to keep looking out. Like the ancients who thought that comets portend war and the death of kings, we have our own special fears that become more obvious in the light of Halley's comet.

There's another reason for being cautious about Schaaf's proposal. Halley's comet is swinging around the sun in a slightly different trajectory in 1986 than it did in 1910, when it lighted up the night four times more brightly than a full moon. It won't come nearly as close to Earth this time and although it will be seen as much larger than a major star, it won't appear to be any brighter. But its phenomenal tail should be clearly visible to the naked eye and may seem to stretch a quarter of the distance from the horizon to the top of the sky.

Halley watchers don't want people disappointed in their comet, after centuries of build-up. So they are reluctant to promise a celestial superstar. And without superstar billing, it will be difficult to arrange the necessary lights-out.

But there are other reasons than Halley's comet for considering turn-

ing down the lights at night. In an energy-short age, our cities and suburbs are wastefully over-illuminated. Studies show no clear correlation between municipal lighting levels and incidences of crime. Light pollution is a growing problem for astronomers and increasingly interferes with their observations. And light pollution forces millions of us to live in earthly isolation without ever glimpsing the stars.

Schaaf thinks the most likely way to get a dim-out for comet watching is for each metropolitan area and town to pick its own time and make its own plans, including arrangements for increased security. Timing, he suggests, should be based on local weather expectations.

The comet will first become visible in late 1985, when it sweeps past Earth on its way toward the sun. As it speeds closer, solar winds and radiation will brighten its tail -- made up of cosmic dust, ice gases and debris left over from the formation of the universe--and stretch it out for millions of miles across the sky.

Then the great comet will whip around the sun and be flung back out across the orbits of the planets toward what scientists now theorize may be a sort of cold storage area for

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THE PRAIRIE ASTRONOMER is published monthly by the Prairie Astronomy Club, and is free to all club members. Yearly subscription without club membership is \$6.00. Regular membership, \$16.00. Family membership is \$18.00. Memberships include 1-year subscription to SKY & TELESCOPE, the club newsletter, and 4 quarterly issues of THE REFLECTOR, Journal of the Astronomical League. Address correspondence and membership renewals to: PRAIRIE ASTRONOMY CLUB, INC., P.O. Box 80553, Lincoln, Nebraska 68501.



# IF YOU MISSED OUR LAST MEETING...

The meeting opened with a few comments from Russ concerning the good job done on this year's Astronomy Day display. "Of course, next year the banner will have to have lights", someone said, but the mood indicated that the day had gone well.

A letter from the Lincoln Fest people indicated that there would be a fee for participating in the next celebration. Though the club might break even if it were to sell posters, most felt that the trouble would be greater than any benefit gained from having a booth. Since Lincolnfest is

still a long way off, voting on the issue was tabled until a later time.

Russ Genzmer gave an entertaining and informative program on building a 10-inch reflector with lots of tips on what not to do, as well as encouragement that making your own telescope is not as bad as it may seem. With the kind of results that Russ showed everyone, more people should give it a try.

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**FOR SALE--** 6-INCH NEWTONIAN f/4.5 with Edmund Clock Drive mount and 1 Criterion 18mm eyepiece and Criterion Barlow. Also may be used as f/22.5 Cassegrain. Parks tube and Telescopes helical focuser. Contact Roger Besch, 467-1532.

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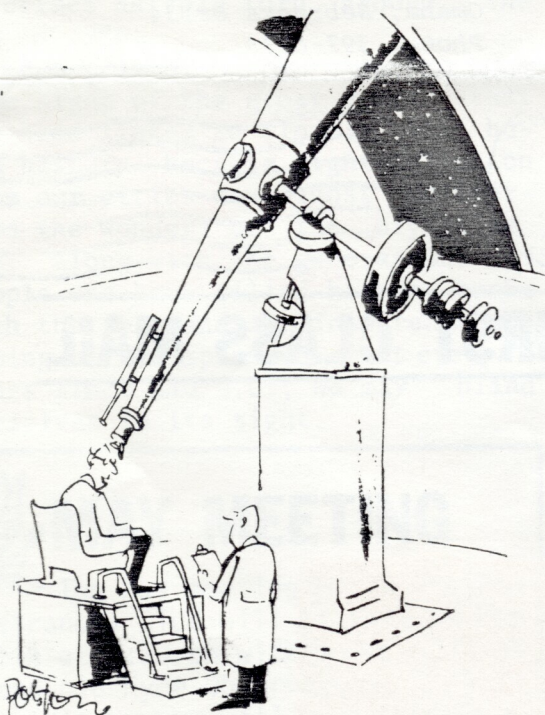
## Light Pollution (from Page 2)

comets beyond the edges of the solar system. Earthlings will have several weeks to look at the comet as it streaks, tail first, away from the sun in the early spring of 1986.

Halley's comet won't return from the frigid dark of outer space until 2062. Each sweep around the sun consumes perhaps 1 percent of a comet's fragile substance and eventually it will disintegrate, like several other comets were known to do, into a collection of celestial debris.

It will say something terrible about our civilization if most of us miss seeing Halley's comet this time around--because we have blotted out the night sky from our lives and are afraid to change and let ourselves look up. Even if Halley's comet doesn't live up to its historic billing we owe ourselves an occasional look at the stars.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"One thing bothers me about my new discovery. Do you think the world is ready for a comet named Jones?"



## SO, YOU SAY, "I'VE NEVER RECEIVED 'THE REFLECTOR'?"...

Some members stoutly maintain that they are not receiving their Astronomical League newsletter, *THE REFLECTOR*. Your ALCOR (Astronomical League Correspondent) just as stoutly (maybe moreso) maintains that a complete mailing list of club members in good standing is filed twice yearly with the League when they request it for their computer updates.

We note that the May, 1982, edition of *THE REFLECTOR* was received during the week of May 10. All PAC members who had their names on the January club list should have received the May *REFLECTOR*. (Note: If you are not a club member, but only a newsletter subscriber, you are not a League member, and would not receive a *REFLECTOR*.)

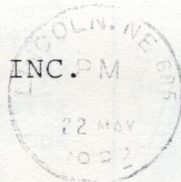
IF YOU WERE LISTED AS A PAID MEMBER IN THE JANUARY PRAIRIE ASTRONOMER, AND YOUR MEMBERSHIP WAS NOT ALLOWED TO EXPIRE IN FEBRUARY OR MARCH, AND YOU DID NOT RECEIVE THE MAY REFLECTOR, CONTACT LEE THOMAS. We will get to the bottom of it. Your club treasury just got drained to the tune of \$63 to pay for your League memberships--you deserve to get the *REFLECTOR* at the very least.

FOR THE RECORD...

Associate newsletter editor John Lortz wants contributors to know he has moved to a new address in Omaha:

7305 Grant, #1  
Omaha, Nebraska 68134  
Phone: 397-6218

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